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ASPIN RELEASES INDOCHINA STUDY

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- When China attacked Vietnam last month, the United States had known of the possibility for more than six weeks, Rep. Les Aspin (D-Wis.) revealed today.

Hearings before the House Intelligence Subcommittee on Oversight, chaired by Aspin, showed that U.S. intelligence tracked Chinese and Vietnamese military deployments well before the fighting started in Indochina.

"But the intelligence community misinterpreted Vietnam's plans and did not really believe Hanoi would try to swallow all of Cambodia," Aspin said.

The Wisconsin Democrat today released a study of the intelligence community's performance in the latest Indochina crisis. He said the mere fact that the community was aware of the possibility of China attacking Vietnam six weeks in advance of the fact was no mean feat.

Analysts received unusually few clues to the Chinese and Vietnamese military build-ups. A knowledge of the two countries' military habits enabled the analysts to evaluate the clues correctly.

The assessment of each nation's intentions was less accurate than the tracking of military capabilities, Aspin noted. The crisis began last fall with Vietnam's preparations for an attack on Cambodia (Kampuchea), then allied with China.

Intelligence analysts knew that Vietnam would attack Cambodia but misread the scope of Vietnam's objectives there. They forecast that Vietnam would not attempt to occupy the whole country, which in fact the Vietnamese did do.

The misunderstanding of Vietnamese intentions prevented most analysts from foreseeing the Chinese attack even earlier, Aspin said. Chinese leaders had warned that their retaliation would depend on how far Vietnam went in Cambodia. Thus most analysts expected China's actions to be as restrained as the anticipated Vietnamese attack.

"Once the Vietnamese attack proved more far reaching than predicted," Aspin said, "the analysts adjusted their forecasts of the Chinese reaction. They also spotted China's buildup beginning in early December."

Aspin noted that individual analysts and the Strategic Warning Staff in the Pentagon had understood Vietnam's intentions more accurately than the community as a whole. He suggested that Admiral Stansfield Turner's efforts as Director of Central Intelligence to bring competing views to the fore in intelligence reports should be broadened. This would help policy makers consider alternatives to the intelligence agencies' official forecasts.

The report follows:

"INTELLIGENCE PERFORMANCE
ON THE CHINA-VIETNAM BORDER"

BY
REP. LES ASPIN

MARCH 1979

In the wake of the intelligence confusion over what was happening in Iran last year, it is reassuring to find that the intelligence community did a far better, if still imperfect job, in its handling of the latest Indochina crisis.

The House Intelligence Subcommittee on Oversight held several days of hearings in recent weeks probing the intelligence community's performance. On the basis of those hearings, I reached three conclusions:

- 1) Intelligence analysts did a good job of describing the capabilities of Vietnamese, Chinese and Soviet forces, with the result that policy makers understood the options open to these countries well before the fighting started. This was no mean feat. Information on military movements was incomplete. Years of study of foreign military patterns paid off by enabling analysts to recognize the meaning of fragments of information.
- 2) Policy makers listened to the intelligence message. They actively sought the intelligence community's views through formal and informal channels. The latter were particularly important, as formally coordinated documents could not convey the diversity of intelligence analysts' individual views.
- 3) The community experienced less success in early assessment of Vietnamese, Chinese and Soviet intentions. The community underestimated the likelihood that Vietnam intended to occupy all of Kampuchea (Cambodia). Consequently it doubted that China would attack Vietnam until the occupation of Kampuchea and evidence of a Chinese buildup on Vietnam's border indicated otherwise. The community initially exaggerated the likelihood of Soviet intervention.

2.

According to testimony from the Department of State and the Department of Defense, the intelligence community provided sufficiently accurate, timely notice of impending Vietnamese and Chinese actions that policy makers could prepare options and act in anticipation of hostilities.

The Intelligence Record

During the summer months of 1978, tensions between China and Vietnam rose over the issue of ethnic Chinese refugees expelled from Vietnam. Noting the absence of main force units on either side of the Sino-Vietnam border, intelligence publications that conveyed the coordinated view of the community saw little chance of hostilities.

The Strategic Warning Staff, jointly manned by CIA and the Defense Intelligence Agency and housed in the Pentagon, took exception to the general view that Sino-Vietnamese hostilities were unlikely. SWS analysts foresaw as early as June 1978 a "military incident...[with] growing potential for escalation into a more serious conflict." This prediction was borne out by a clash between Chinese and Vietnamese border guards in August 1978.

Also during the summer, Vietnamese and Kampuchean forces were continuing border fighting that dated back virtually to the establishment of the Khmer Communist regime 1975. Intelligence collection and analysis followed the fighting during the summer and also kept policy makers aware of the gradual Vietnamese military build-up. Meanwhile, the intelligence community issued a memorandum on Vietnam's internal political and economic situation; this study could have prompted analysts to conclude that the intolerable drain on Vietnamese resources of a continuing border war with Kampuchea might impel Vietnam to try to oust the Pol Pot regime and bring the friction to a rapid end. However, the intelligence community's agreed opinion, formulated in a

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memorandum published in November, but prepared during the preceding months, held that Vietnam would not overrun all of Kampuchea.

Most intelligence analysts misinterpreted information they received that Vietnam was sponsoring a Kampuchean resistance movement to the Pol Pot regime. They considered the resistance movement an alternative to direct attack. They maintained this perception despite having assessed correctly that the guerrillas could not overthrow the Pol Pot regime in the immediate future and that Vietnam wanted to finish the regime soon. Again, SWS did better, perceiving that it was "difficult to believe that Hanoi has deployed [a large force] along the Kampuchean border if its objective is confined to securing its border and stimulating an insurgent movement inside Kampuchea."

From a policy maker's perspective, however, these failures were minor in comparison to the community's success in following Vietnamese military preparations. Because of this, policy makers knew that Vietnam plotted some kind of military operations against Kampuchea, although they did not anticipate that Hanoi would push all the way to the Thai border. And the policy makers opposed any military action, whether it was a limited border campaign or an all-out invasion. Despite condemning the Pol Pot regime's execrable human rights record, U.S. policy makers believed that a Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea, whatever its scale, would harm the interests of peace.

Chinese leaders said that the extent of Vietnam's assault on Kampuchea would determine the extent of China's retaliation. Intelligence collectors gathered these statements and most intelligence analysts throughout the community understood their significance. Thus, when Vietnam began an all-out push to occupy Kampuchea in December,

analysts and policy makers were prepared to adjust their view of China's probable actions and to accept the increased probability of an attack on Vietnam.

The timing of China's decision to assault Vietnam is still unknown. Military movements to the border were first observed in early December but they may not have ensued immediately after the decision, as the massive redeployment presumably required advance planning. The decision may also have been taken in stages as internal Chinese politics strengthened the influence of advocates of a hard line toward Vietnam. CIA followed these developments but did not integrate internal politics into its printed assessments of the border conflict. China's leadership politics were an ingredient in SWS's more accurate forecasts.

Collectors and analysts relayed information about China's buildup despite their uncertainty about decision making in Peking. As collectors are responsible only for preliminary evaluation of their reports, they passed the news of Chinese redeployments first. The CIA analysts' warning had to await sufficient information for a pattern to emerge, but nonetheless by early January an Alert Memorandum was issued that concluded: "The Chinese may choose to engineer a strong localized demonstration of Chinese power along the frontier," like the attack on India in 1962. This judgment was a prescient forecast of what China actually did six weeks later, and up to the attack CIA continued to reinforce it. Through informal channels, furthermore, some policy making staffs were already aware of the judgment days before its formal issuance. The remoteness of the battle area made this achievement all the more impressive.

5.

The community had trouble in assessing the likelihood of Soviet involvement. It was first thought that the Soviets might retaliate along the Sino-Soviet border. SWS, which had provided the earliest accurate assessment of Chinese intentions, said that the Soviets "almost certainly will attempt... counterpressures along the Sino-Soviet border." Later the community recognized that the likelihood of Soviet intervention would depend on the depth of China's penetration into Vietnam.

The early misreading of Soviet intentions was not a critical fault. Intelligence analysts had not so wedded themselves intellectually to the predictions of Soviet involvement that they failed to notice the signals of Soviet inaction. These were obtained from Soviet public statements and other sources.

Conclusions

On the whole, the intelligence community served the nation well in the Indochina crisis. Its ability rapidly to observe, assess and report military preparations informed policy makers of impending Vietnamese Chinese and Soviet actions well in advance. The policy makers' active efforts to find out what the intelligence community knew kept channels of communication open.

The exercise shows the particular importance of devoting resources and talent to the task, which may seem fruitless in the short run, of developing basic knowledge about potential crisis areas. It was the community's military expertise that made possible the reporting of the Vietnamese and Chinese buildups.

To fault the community for inability to ascertain political intentions in comparison with its discernment of military capabilities may be unfair. Capabilities are easier to establish than intentions. While the intelligence agencies can and should improve their political analysis, one should not undervalue what they can do now. In a military confrontation like China's with Vietnam, assessment of capabilities is what the U.S. policy maker most needs.

Some intelligence staffs and individual analysts had an earlier, better feel for Chinese and Vietnamese intentions than the coordinated interagency documents conveyed. As Director of Central Intelligence, Admiral Stansfield Turner has encouraged the presentation of competing

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views in the texts of the various interagency publications, as opposed to the previous practice of relegating such views to footnotes. The record on China's border war with Vietnam suggests that efforts to make differences of opinion inside the intelligence community known to policy makers should be continued and strengthened. This suggestion should not distract attention from the real services performed by the intelligence community during the recent Indochinese crisis.

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